CHRISTMAS: TIME OF HOPE AND COMFORT

How can there be hope? What source of comfort is there for a person who intelligently observes and contemplates the current onrush of history? In the past several months history has again issued ominous threats to mankind. Castro in Cuba, Red China invading India, Berliners escaping over and ever tightening wall of oppression. Isn't the really intelligent stance one of naked realism, no holds barred? Isn't the only live option for men today to accept the rotten hand history has dealt; to be a realist, which of course means to be a pessimist? Comfort? Hope? Where? we ask.

We are not unique in our asking of these questions. History flows on; civilizations rise and fall; empires come and ago. But strangely the questions we ask today, have been asked before Specifically I refer to a group of several thousand Hebrews, captured and dragged off to Babylon some 500 years before the birth of Christ. Israel had involved itself in some questionable political maneuvers. The prophets had warned that Israel was unfaithful to their covenant with God; and that judgement was surely in the near future. The inevitable occured. The mighty forces of the Babylonian empire invaded Judah and were terribly and quickly victorious. To insure that Israel should never rise again, the Babylonians took the cream of the crop back to Babylon. Lawyers, politicians, doctors, priest, leaders from all walks of life were exiled hundreds of miles from their home and forced to live ina foreign and pagan culture. For seventy years the exiles remained in Babylon. Those who had lived in Jerusalem, who still remembered the temple worship, were getting old and dying off. A new generation had been born; a generation

of Israelites who had never set foot on the promised land. It was a critical situation; Israel was deterrorating both culturally and religiously. The younger people with no first hand experience with the Hebraic tradition were easily converted to the Babylonian way of life.

The Israelites remembered God's promise to Abraham; that his descendants should multiply and be like the sands of the ocean. They knew the words "I will be your God and you shall be my people." They knew that Israel was the chosen of the Lord; his children and servants. Their history was divine history; the destiny a divintely ordained destiny. But now these remembrances only added pain to grief. Whatever faith and hope might tell them, they were confronted with the harsh facts of history. Their world had fallento pieces. Facts were facts. Israel, as a people, was in grave danger of being stopped dead; of ceasing, forever, to exist. This was a people who knew real despair; a people without comfort or hope.

To this disparaging situation, and these despairing people a voice called out. The man who wrote the words of our scripture lesson this morning began his message with a word of comfort. Biblical research has determined that the author of the material on Isaiah 40-55 could not have been the prophet Isaiah himself. The writer remains obscure, and it seems as if he wanted it that way. Unlike the other prophets he rarely uses the pronoun I, he tells nothing of himself. And we are left with the unidentified writings of perhaps the most sensitive, most profound writer in all of the old Testament. This man was a perfect synthesis of poet and prophet. His prose is unequaled in eloquence by any writer of his time. His theological insight is mature far beyond

the mentality of the time. / His words are perhaps the most important in the O.T. Some have said, and rightly sop that the man who wrote the 15 chapters in the middle of the book of Isaiah was the turest prophet of Jesus Christ among all the prophets.

His message is simple. It is revaled in his first words "comfort, comfort, my people, says your God. / A better translation of the Hebrew would be "Be comforted, Be comforted." This is the content of the message. He was not a naive optimist; he didn't attempt to deny the reality of Israel's predicament. / Things were bad, Israel had had a ~~bad~~ hard time of it; and indeed found survival threatneed. / And yet the prophet had the audacity to say "Be comforted." / The Israelites in Babylon had forgotten there was a God. They mouthed the old ritualistic phrases; they told the old stories, they worshipped when they were able. But ~~there were~~ this was just on the surface; perhaps ~~been~~ given habits. What they really believed, on the inside, was a different story. / Their despair shows that they really didn't mean it when they said ("we believe in the one God Almighty, the Lord of creation.") They, like many people after them believed in God with their mouths, but lived as if he didn't exist. The prophet's advise to this pathetic bunch is to the point--("Behold your God.") His sole purpose, in the ~~eleven verses~~ passage I read this morning and throughout his wrtings is to remind the downhearted that there is a God; and that God is in the center of the stage as he always has been. / It is God who created the world, who holds the nations in his hands. The prophet ask the question. ("Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?") / God is the director of history. There is no need for crying and despair. God is God--Behold him!

Two thousand and five hundred years later we find ourselves in a very similar situation to that of the Hebrew exiles. / To be sure our problems today are infinitely more confusing and complex; but basically they are still the matter of survival; the question of history's direction (where are we going?) and underlying this the deeper question of what meaning is there to this patch work quilt of onrushing events that is contemporary history.

Hovering over our heads, in every minutes of every day is the same hopeless situation--of sitting by helplessly while nonexistence creeps up on us. / The only difference is one of magnitude. / 2500 yers ago it was amatter of slow death for one particular nation. Today it is sudden death for eferyone. This threat is undeAirceable; to ignore it is to close one's eyes and mind to the blunt and terrible truth.

We must also face the threat of financial death. I would estimate that there are not too many persons here today who are certain of their financial status ten years from now. / Across the country men are laid off by the thousands and hundreds of thousands. / Those now working must live under the constant threat that the next big move by the company may cost them their job. / This is a very real threat--not to be denied nor ignored; for here in the wealthiest country in the world, a country where a man can make his own niche in life by his own abilities and initiative, good men are turning into vegetables, having been beaten down by the futile attempt to find a job. / This is not a direct threat to life--but in a very real sense it is a threat to existence; a threat to the meaning and good ness of life.

Of course we all face the threat of death in a hundred ways each day. Cancer, automobile accidents, sudden death lurks around every corner if we realy want to be truthful about it.

All our magnificent achievements in the field of science become like hollow, tiny noises--when we consider that never have we been able to discover a way to cure our culture of the sickness that produces slums, alcholism, and juvenile delinqunecy. / Modern technology allows us to be in contact with people of every nation of the world; but these feats of communication technology are rendered meaningless by the fact that we've never yet learned to live peacefully with one another.

Like the Hebrews, history had dealt us a rotten hand. / We are not God's chosen; but we are a nation that has tried to live peacefully; we have given of our wealth and our lives that the world might be peaceful. / We have suffered, three times in the past 35 years to rid the world of festering, demonic totalatariansism, and what has been our reward? In the place of Prussian Militarism came Nazisim; and in the place of Facism has come Communism. / History has slapped us ~~xr~~ harshly in the face, numerable times. / Perhaps the best thing to do is to give up, and to wallow in despair and pessimism.

Man seems just as helpless today as he did to the Israelites. Man is still caught in the powerful jaws of a cynical and cruel fate--that mocks his efforts, that allows history to flow on competely disregarding his hopes and dreams. / Alfred Lord T"nnyson expressed it in a memorable line--("However we brave it out, we men are a little breed.")

Where do we stand in this matte? Do we agree that history has no meaning, no direction; that if there is a God he is quite ineefective when it comes to the flow of history? / A good spokesmen for this view is Emil Zola, a freach novelist. He likens human history to a railroad train, drawn by a locomotive whose driver has been killed,

dashing at headlong speed into midnight. "The train is the world; we are the freight; fate is the track; death is the darkness; God is the engineer--who is dead." Most people would find this brutal pessimism distasteful--but isn't this precisely the way most of us talk, and act and live? We believe in God--but when it comes to the immense power conflicts of history--he just doesn't seem up to the task.

The great American Philosopher Henry Mames took a more comfortable but no less pessimistic view. James believed in God--but about the only thing God could do was lend sme divine assistance to the efforts of good men. When it came to believing a God who is the Lord and Master, (even of history,) James backed down. It doesn't take much analytical power to ascertain that modern mentality lies somewhere between these two. When all the barriers are down, when we really tell the truth, wouldn't a great many of us have to sadly shake our heads in agreement? Wouldn't we have to admit--that we simply don't believe that God's will is operative in human history? Don't many of us believe in a God that doesn't do a thing? Aren't many of us at heart, forborn and hopeless pessimists?

Our age has been called the age of Anxiety. Those who study us tell us that the source of anxiety is that we now live in a world that has no room for hope. Most of us can live with it; most of us can put on a facade of cheerfulness, a veneer of optimism--but all of us, underneath, are torn by the drastic assumption that we are caught; that God is ineffective, that there is no meaning to life. The Freanch Existentialists, the late Albert Camus, an outspoken disciples of this view, once said ("the most courageous thing a man can do is to cmmit suicide.") If his assumptions are true; if Emil Zola, and Henry Mames

znd all those who think history is hurtling, unguided, towards nothingness are ~~true~~ right--then indeed the only solution is to end this despair and anxiety and courageously cmmit suicide.

What is there in the world today to combat and refute this pessimism? Not very much, admittedly. But there is one institution that ought to be the citadel of hilarious optimism--the Church of Jesus Christ!

It is the testimony of Christianity that there is a God; a Creator and Father God who does guide his creation. Men may warp history temporarilly; nation may rise up against nation, but this does not mean God has abdicated from his throne. On what grounds do we make these outlandish claims? If we have no serious reason to make these affirmations of hope we are guilty of vain and ignorant optisim.

The prophet urged the downhearted Israelites to be comforted. He urged them to Behold their God. He urged that they spread the word ("Get you pt to a high mountain--say to the cities of Judah--Behold you God.") He set out in beautiful poertry the omnipotence ~~compared~~ and power of God; he stated that the Lord God could be compared to no man and no thing. He was the power behind and above all powers--He was God and ultimately his will would be victorious. The prophets words were shortly proven as Cyrus the Great, in fact, did defeat Babylon and allow Israel to return and to live in relative freedom.

But what about today? On what grounds today, do we say there is room and justification for comfort and hope? The grounds are specifically theevent that we celebrate on Dec. 25 the Birth of Jesus Christ. In that small and undramatic event of birth, all pessimism, all despair is utterly shattered; for in the Bethlehem stable God has acted. He

has shown th at he does care about mankind. / In the smallest--and yet most profound of ways--the Infinite and Eternal Godhead has invaded the realm of human history, the realm of human affairs. / The birth of Jesus Christ is the historical event on which we base our hope. / This is not an abandoned world, at the hands of fate--it is a world created good; loved and nurtured by the creator and visited by him in his only Son Jesus Christ.

This fundamental optimism has been nairvely interpreted by some men. There are those who have found pseudo comfort in denying that evil does exist--by denying that antyhing is wrong with the human situation. But remember that the prophet wasn't guilty of this. He took into account the perfect wretchedness of the Hebrews--but with confidence he could still say "Be comforted."

A scotch poet has said ("Religion is born when we accept the ultimate frustration of mene human effort, and at the same time realize the strength which comes frm union with Supra human reality.") This is the Christmas message to a sick and despairing world. / When hisotry flows over top of us, casting aside our feeble efforts; when Pessimism seems the only alternative--we must look to a manger / a new born baby--and hear the words ringing like bells--Behold your God!

Human strife is a fact, men are dying--futily and fruitlessly today; we are all caught daily in situations that don't make sense; we live under a sky filled with fallout, resultant from man's honing pp his ability to kill and destroy. / But above it all is a star--a star, whose pure bright light means the Lord has come; a star which cries out--Behold your God!